



Conservation at the Crossroads

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The tragic Sixth Extinction has sparked a search for new conservation paradigms. One approach advocates massive market interventions; by contrast, another urges the creation of vast protected areas. The opening essay proposes a third path, one rooted in democratic processes, engagement with nature, and post-capitalism. Commenters debate what a revolution in conservation would look like.

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Opening Essay

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Radical Conservation: Misdirections, New Directions

Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher

Lost in the Current of the Mainstream

The world is losing biodiversity at a frightening pace. Record numbers of species are going extinct, indelibly altering the character of ecosystems and impoverishing Earth's community of life. The scale of the impact, along with other major crises like climate change, has prompted many scientists to announce a new geological era, the Anthropocene. This hotly contested term may not be the most accurate way of describing our current moment, but the urgent need for transformational change grows clearer with each species lost.¹

Prodded by this dire reality, the global conservation community is sounding the alarm ever louder. The World Wildlife Fund has recently stated bluntly that "our relationship with nature is broken." Some academics speak of "biological annihilation" in describing the current crisis.² Mainstream organizations are recognizing that the crisis isn't coming—it's already here.

We find ourselves in this morass not for lack of a large, well-funded global conservation effort. In fact, many people may still feel a sense of relief that for the biodiversity crisis, at least, there are major institutions and policy frameworks in place that seek to solve it. And yet, there is an unsettling contradiction here: in recent decades, the extinction crisis has accelerated despite the success of the major prong of conventional strategies: expanding protected areas. Doubling down on conventional conservation approaches will thus be insufficient to shift our dangerous trajectory towards a sustainable future. In failing to address the underlying forces driving the biodiversity crisis, mainstream conservation has proven incapable of producing politics, policies, and practices matched to the challenge.

In fact, conventional approaches are arguably part of the problem. To understand why, we need to be clear about the meaning of “mainstream conservation.” The dominant paradigm has roots in the “fortress” model that arose in North America in the late 1800s and early 1900s and sought to protect natural areas from the impacts of rapid industrialization, while allowing such industrialization to continue elsewhere. Thus, from the start, mainstream conservation has been intertwined with the fundamental social and philosophical causes of the contemporary global crises: the impacts of capitalism’s unquenchable thirst for economic growth and a response that understands nature and culture as dichotomous. Rather than challenging the expanding capitalist order, the conservation movement cordoned off spaces for (elite) recreation while expanding the uses of biodiversity for economic growth through its conversion to “natural capital.”

The relationship between mainstream conservation and capitalism deepened in the early 1990s with the ascendance of “sustainable development” discourse. Bowing to the hegemonic worship of profits and the market, conservationists began to argue that the most effective way to protect nature was to give it monetary value. By revealing its economic value, nature would be protected, it was hoped, through market-based instruments that include ecotourism, payments for ecosystem services, and more. Global NGOs and intergovernmental organizations established partnerships with multinational corporations to advance the alleged shared goal of conservation; all the while, those same corporations continued to extract, emit, and encroach.

Now, one could argue that without all these efforts to set aside protected areas and build capitalist awareness of the value of nature, the biodiversity crises could have been even worse. But this offers little consolation as the extinction crisis accelerates. Indeed, by masking the deeper causes of the crisis, the accommodationist mainstream has delayed the emergence of the political and economic awareness critical for curbing the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss. The time for removing the mask and radically rethinking the philosophy and practice of conservation is long past due.

Radical Alternatives or Flawed Paradigms?

In response to the urgency of the extinction crisis and the insufficiencies of status quo responses, a number of conservation groups have advocated for major new initiatives to transform mainstream conservation. Many of the prominent voices fall into one of two camps of reformers: “new

conservationists” or “neoprotectionists.” New conservationists call for abandoning the idea of “pristine” nature and, instead, learning how to live constructively with nature and use it for human development. Neoprotectionists advance proposals to massively expand global protected areas, most prominently through the 30x30 initiative that seeks to protect 30% of the earth by 2030.³ While offering important insights and purporting to address the root causes of our extinction crisis, both approaches suffer from fundamental flaws that negate their potential to provide a foundation for transformative action.

The new conservationists (or “eco-modernists”), to their credit, reject the nature-culture dichotomy that treats the natural world as a place “over there” to be protected rather than the living basis of all life, including human life. Ecosystems always change, they argue, and in the Anthropocene, humans must figure out how to live in and manage the earth as a “rambunctious garden.” This camp embraces the critique from social scientists that conservation projects must do no harm to the people around them, such as those displaced by the creation of protected areas. Instead, such efforts should be designed to benefit local communities and address the underlying social and economic causes of biodiversity loss—or risk failure. But the new conservation undermines this kernel of wisdom by reinforcing, rather than resisting, the dominant political economy and championing market-based “solutions” like environmental services and natural capital valuation that ultimately accommodate conservation to capitalism. If the despoilment of nature is traced in good measure to the predations of capitalism, how can more capitalism be the path to a sustainable future, optimistic claims about technological innovations notwithstanding?⁴

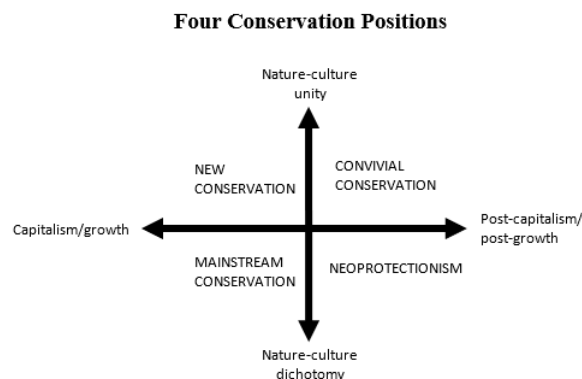
The neoprotectionist approach is the inverse of new conservation. Where new conservation rejects the nature-culture dichotomy, neoprotectionist advocates affirm the split and side with nature. They believe that the only way to stave off collapse of the Earth’s life-supporting ecosystems is to protect nature from people. They often reject market-based conservation schemes as harmful or inadequate, instead putting forth ambitious proposals to return as much as half the earth to “nature.” Notably, they also call for sharp limits on human populations, on consumption, and on economic growth.⁵ Thus, in contrast to new conservation, many neoprotectionists are critical of contemporary capitalism, either implicitly or explicitly.

The flaw in neoprotectionism, however, is the unrealistic faith in the possibility of separating our way out of the problem. Capitalism's long history of transgressing the very borders it creates suggests that any such separation would at best be temporary. But even if capitalist expansion could be contained, the neoprotectionist vision of cordoning off immense swaths of the earth would entail unprecedented human displacement and militarized enforcement. Historically, the implementation of protected areas often required forced relocation of indigenous communities, thus removing the very people whose land management made the areas attractive to conservationists in the first place.

The policy uptake of major elements of these new frameworks signals a brewing "conservation revolution." Yet neither perspective adequately addresses the socio-ecological roots of the biodiversity crisis, nor do their politics offer a progressive alternative to conventional politics or the very real threat of reactionary, imperial politics around the world. Hence, we need another model of conservation that rejects both the capitalist imperative for growth *and* the rigid dualism that separates humans from the rest of nature.

Towards Convivial Conservation

Realizing the need for a third way inspired our concept of "convivial conservation," which can serve as a transformational framework for conservation in a Great Transition.⁶ The crucial difference between convivial conservation, mainstream conservation, and the other two radical alternatives is that convivial conservation explicitly starts from a political ecology perspective, steeped in a robust critique of capitalist political economy.⁷ Its rejection of both the nature-culture dichotomy *and* growth-centric capitalism makes convivial conservation more radical than the other alternatives, but at the same time, given the scale and urgency of the crisis and its root causes, more realistic.



The underlying premise of convivial conservation asserts that our dire conservation challenges cannot be met without directly confronting capitalism *and* its ingrained dichotomies and contradictions. The framework is rooted in a politics of equity, structural change, and environmental justice. It directly targets the economic interests of global elites and transcends the technocratic faith of many contemporary pragmatists. Most importantly, it enthusiastically joins the current upswell for systemic structural change via a Great Transition. It stands in solidarity with local, indigenous movements seeking to restore and reinvent convivial forms of sustainability that connect humans with the rest of nature.⁸ Convivial conservation embraces this broader vision, asserting that success in the conservation arena requires confronting and transforming the overarching global political economy in which it is embedded.

The paradigm of convivial conservation calls for changing how we engage with conservation as both discourse and practice. First, we must change how we *conceptualize* nature and re-embed “protected areas” into their social, political and ecological surroundings. We must stop protecting nonhuman nature *from* humans but actively promote ways of living together with all the complexities this entails, that is, no longer regarding nature as distant “protected areas” but engaging with them as “promoted areas.” We should no longer see ourselves as “saving” nature but instead insist on nurturing ways human and nonhuman nature can thrive together. We must challenge the view of human nature pressed on us by mainstream economics: one that considers us separate from the rest of nature and egoistically focuses on profit maximization. We must frame human nature as predisposing us to connect positively with and create space for nonhuman life by viewing material needs and wants within the broader context of qualitative aspects of fulfillment.

Second, we must overhaul how we *experience* nature. The COVID-19 crisis shows that relying on unsustainable and unreliable tourism and other market-based mechanisms to finance life-sustaining ecosystems and biodiversity is illusory. This understanding also means we must move from a “spectacular” to an everyday environmentalism. Yes, spectacular natures—whether the majesty of an Amazonian waterfall or the sorrow of the climate-threatened polar bear—sell. But they are a minute part of all the varied, more mundane ‘everyday’ natures on which our long-term survival depends.

Finally, out of such new thinking about and interacting with nature must come a new way of *governing* our relationship with nature, one that moves from privatized expert technocracy to

popular democratic engagement. Conservation must work to make biodiversity a global commons rooted in direct democratic decision-making centered on people living with (endangered) biodiversity, not the purview of a handful of mostly white, well-off experts.

In essence, convivial conservation calls for a transformation of the model of development. Recoiling from global capitalism's ravaging of the natural world, like some neoprotectionists, convivial conservationists reject the demand for heroic land set-asides and the large-scale displacement this would entail (compounding and extending historic harms). Rather, the time has come to decolonize conservation by providing reparations to those who already have been displaced and marginalized by protected areas. This could take the form of returning land to local communities or at least adopting co-ownership or co-management responsibilities in ways that respect biodiversity as well as indigenous and other marginalized peoples and their rights to nature.

In this sense, convivial conservation shares new conservation's concern that biodiversity goals cannot be met through efforts that lead to impoverishment and displacement of local communities. But it eschews new conservation's adherence to the dominant capitalist paradigm and its flawed policy tools grounded in market mechanisms. Instead, we should embrace emerging alternative approaches, such as the redistribution of wealth by instituting some form of a conservation basic income (CBI). Such a policy would ensure a decent life to people living in or near promoted areas, and thereby facilitate local care for biodiversity.

With an ethic of decolonization and redistribution at its core, a conservation strategy fit for a Great Transition would abandon cozy relationships with corporations and extractive industries of mainstream and new conservation organizations. These relationships, pursued in the name of fallacious pragmatism, result in greenwashing and legitimization of unsustainable business models. Instead, conservation actors need to join together in an independent global movement—a Convivial Conservation Coalition—committed to challenging vested interests through coordinated campaigns, while advocating for and experimenting with alternative practices.

Dire conditions on the ground combined with ineffectual mainstream strategies underscore a grim reality: a fundamental shift in the conservation paradigm must be made. The ambitious approaches outlined here—new conservation and neoprotectionism—are responses to this challenge that

have engaged many conservationists attuned to the urgent need for radical action in the face of the accelerating sixth extinction. Ultimately, though, these alternatives are hamstrung by their failure to go to the root of the crisis.

Skeptics and naysayers may dismiss strategies rooted in fundamental social change as inherently unrealistic. However, to face the scale of the crisis with eyes wide open and to locate drivers deep within institutional power structures is to recognize that transformative politics, not incrementalism, creates the pragmatic path. Moreover, imagining conservation outside the capitalist box is a liberating exercise, countering eco-anxieties and catastrophic nightmares, while releasing positive collective energy. A movement united around a convivial conservation vision would be a powerful change agent in the Great Transition.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Jason Moore's discussion of the "Capitalocene" in *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015) as well as "Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy," GTI Forum, *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/interrogating-the-anthropocene>.
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5. George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler, eds., *Protecting the Wild. Parks and Wilderness: The Foundation for Conservation* (London: Island Press, 2015); Edward O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* (London: Liveright Publishing, 2016).
6. We expand on the arguments in this essay in *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2020). The term "convivial conservation" comes from the Latin "convivere" ("to live with") and alludes to Ivan Illich's classic *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
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8. Noah Theriault, et al., "Living Protocols: Remaking Worlds in the Face of Extinction," *Social & Cultural Geography* 21, no. 7 (2020): 893–908; see also the important work by the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) consortium: <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/>.

About the Authors



Bram Büscher is Professor and Chair of the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. He is the author of *The Truth About Nature: Environmentalism in the Era of Post-Truth Politics* and *Platform Capitalism* and co-author, with Robert Fletcher, of *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*.



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Panel



Supporting Indigenous Practices

Alejandro Argumedo

Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher's critique of the prevailing approach to conservation, as well as their "convivial conservation" proposal, seems to navigate mainly on the waters of paradigms and societal complexities associated with the Western industrialized world, with much less attention to the paradigms of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have been widely recognized as the most effective stewards of biodiversity, and their holistic approaches (e.g., Sumak Causay, or Buen Vivir), gained from their unique relationships with Mother Earth, offer a transformative path for a new environment-development paradigm.

Indigenous peoples' land-caring approaches are not about the Western "conservation" paradigm (one in which is deeply embedded the belief of "human exceptionality" and "white savior" practices), but rather about recognizing our place as humans, as neighbors, in the galaxy of "All of Our Relations." It is an intentional spiritual approach that has Respect as a central value of a reciprocity-based relationship with all Mother Earth's children. The result is a unique approach of caring for ancestral lands which have been codified in what is termed Territoriality, such as the Ayllus, Markas, Comarcas, Resguardos, Ejidos, etc., in the Americas. Such Territoriality continues to thrive despite the attacks on their traditional structures. It continues to populate the historical memory of people and thus is an inherent part of indigenous discourse, ceremonial and economic practice, knowledge networks, and evolving customary laws and institutions.

Indigenous Territoriality encompasses customary indigenous land tenure, land use (including ritual), production and exchange systems, customary laws and institutions, political organization and goals, and cultural identity. The practice of the indivisibility and interconnectedness of the

cultural and biological realms with the territory creates a common goal for humans, non-humans, and spiritual actors: the goal of achieving Sumak Causay together. As such, the indigenous Territoriality paradigm provides an alternative not just to “conservation” but rather to the current neoliberal development paradigm.

Approaches such as “convivial conservation” change the conservation jargon, but risk continuing the implementation of new types of the same Western neoliberal conservation framework. They would not stop the appropriation and partitioning of indigenous peoples’ territories and landscapes, but rather create a new form of passing indigenous territories to the domain of the State and “conservation” elites. We must avoid populating the lands with more forms of regulation. Why not support indigenous struggles for land rights that seek the recognition of existing and effective indigenous expression of territoriality?

Supporting indigenous Territorialities goes beyond supporting biodiversity conservation; it is also an invitation to organize and reinscribe communal systems that have been erased and dismantled all over the world by the increasing expansion of the capitalist economy and the conservation paradigm. If our common goal is the maintenance of the life support system of the world, the voices of indigenous peoples must be heard, and their approaches to caring for the land supported and recognized.

About the Author



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In Defense of Protection

Eileen Crist

Limits of space compel me to focus on two issues of divergence between convivial conservation and what Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher call neoprotectionism. (I count myself in the latter camp.) The first divergence involves the causation of (and thus solution to) the eco-social crisis. The second relates to the scale of nature protection needed to avert the sixth extinction and to enable Earth's biodiversity to resurge.

The authors identify capitalism and "its unquenchable thirst for economic growth" as the driver of environmental destruction. I agree that capitalism must be superseded. Yet capitalism is not a monolithic enterprise, but rather a multifaceted composition. Beyond private ownership of the means of production and surplus-value extraction, capitalism involves global trade and the infrastructural sprawl that supports it, the institutional allegiance of nation-states, mass production concomitant with supplying a burgeoning global middle-class population, a reigning worldview of nature qua "resources," and consumer culture along with its widespread allure. The hybrid character of the capitalist enterprise has certainly played into its resistance to abolition.

The composite nature of this system forces a diagnosis of a broader array of culprits in the current crisis than the gloss of "capitalism." There is of course broad agreement that nonstop expansionism is the root biophysical cause of biodiversity's unraveling. Expansionism includes that of the economic system (extraction, production, and consumption), the human population, the livestock population, and the technosphere (especially infrastructural development).

The human system that is most detrimental to the rest of life is the food system. The human population, taking on board its predilection for carnivory, has exceeded Earth's capacity to

support it with organic, diversified, and local/regional food production, while simultaneously allowing for the maintenance of biodiversity at all its levels.¹ Food production “in the Anthropocene” occupies entire terrestrial biomes (for example, grasslands and wetlands), while marine life has been devastated by industrial/commercial fishing. The scale of modern-day processing, packaging, trade, and waste of food has further amplified its ecological costs. Indeed, environmental analysts are now identifying the food system as the overarching driver of biological meltdown in terms of land-use takeover and degradation, freshwater withdrawal, marine life depletion, decimation of large wild animals, and excessive consumption of materials and energy, not to say output of greenhouse gases, nitrogen pollution, and pesticide contamination.²

The food system reveals the impossibility of disentangling industrial production regimens, consumption patterns and preferences, sheer numbers of (increasingly) globally connected humans, and techno-infrastructure innovation and expansionism. As prosaic as it may appear by now, the PAT formula remains insightful shorthand. Population x Affluence x Technology, we might quip for our age, equals a food system that “radiates disaster triumphant.”³ Thus, in order to end the extinction crisis, tame climate change, reduce global toxification, and nourish all humans with wholesome food, the variables of industrial productivity, global human population, trade intensity, dietary choices, and technospheric reach all need to be confronted and transformed.

The second aspect of divergence between convivial conservation and neoprotectionism relates to the level of nature protection required (1) to end the extinction crisis and (2) to make reparations for the injustices perpetrated against nonhumans and their homes. To achieve these goals, we must restore, connect, and protect Earth’s ecosystems on a large scale. While protected areas have increased in recent years, the increase has not been sufficient—in quantitative, ecosystem representation, connectivity, and effective management terms—to conserve Earth’s species, population abundances (including migratory phenomena), ecological complexity, and evolutionary potential.⁴ To be sure, size of terrestrial and marine reserves is only one variable for safeguarding biodiversity. Yet large-scale protection is requisite to prevent biodiversity depletion from spiraling into a mass extinction event.⁵ Before touching on how we might still achieve such a vision of nature protection (extensive, interconnected, free of infrastructures, and representative

of all ecosystems), I turn to some highlights of why this zeitgeist of nature protection is superior to alternatives.

Large terrestrial carnivores and herbivores, as well as big marine predators and whale nations, require substantial habitat ranges, unfragmented by infrastructures, free of extractionist operations, and minimally disturbed by modern humans. These requirements are indispensable if big wild animals are to persist in numbers that are viable for their ecological functions and their evolutionary resilience. More generally, bigger reserves contain more species, larger populations, more variety of habitats, and richer gradients of microclimates and other variables (like soil types) than smaller comparable reserves. In continuance with this point, substantially sized protected areas harbor remote regions where sensitive species—highly vulnerable to human pressures, edge effects, and introduced species—can find refuge. Larger protected areas are also more likely to moderate the destructive effects of natural or anthropogenic disturbances (e.g., disease or fire) than smaller ones of the same ecosystem type. As a last point here, the large-scale restoration and protection of Earth's biological wealth is also one of the critical guarantors of Earth system (and thus human) resilience in the face of major anthropogenic perturbations, especially climate change.⁶

If we take as our starting point that Earth's remaining biodiversity (at all levels) is a treasure that warrants preservation, deserves our awe, and can (if we allow it) largely shape the biological and physical parameters of our home planet, then we must figure out how to transform ourselves in order to achieve the large-scale nature protection needed. Elsewhere, I have abridged the mandate for a Great Transition as a two-tiered strategy of humanity *scaling down* and *pulling back*.⁷ Scaling down means reducing commodity production and trade, eschewing wasteful consumer culture, embracing a mostly plant-based diet, investing ambitiously in female education and empowerment, making family planning services universally available, placing strong limits on infrastructural development (especially roads in natural areas), and reconfiguring political and civic life at local/regional levels to include both humans and nonhumans as members and neighbors. Pulling back is all about the conservation factor—generously freeing into self-governance large areas of land, freshwater, and marine habitats so that biodiversity may not only survive but flourish.⁸

In agreement with Büscher and Fletcher, social and ecological transformations should not be undertaken at the expense of human well-being and security.⁹ The question of how strictly to protect nature from people is always looming. The answer is not simple. Protected nature may include or exclude humans, depending on the context of their presence and activities. Human beings can remain integral with the more-than-human world as long as they sustain respectful relations with wild nature in ways that retain the regenerative qualities of its biodiversity. This has been and often remains the case with indigenous peoples. Thus protected areas may include humans with cultural traditions (material and ideational) that foster belonging with, and participating in, the orchestra of life that surrounds them. However, protected areas should exclude or strictly regulate humans with traditions bent upon the appropriation, exploitation, and aggressive management of nature. Clearly, modern people equipped with the mindset of nature-as-resources, and with technologies bent on extracting and profiting from those so-called resources, are inimical to the rest of life. Strong boundaries must be set and enforced to obviate their encroachments.

I also agree with the authors that “human nature” far from being the cause of our dire predicament predisposes us (as they put it) to connect with all of life and to give it space to thrive. Since this inclination is part of the human core, we must endeavor to awaken humanity to what is at stake; tragically, the biodiversity crisis and an imminent mass extinction continue to be shrouded in silence and ignorance. We must educate people about the chance we still have to sustain a living planet, rather than a biologically simplified and colonized one. Therefore, all conservationists might unite in advocating for the recognition that human and nonhuman worlds are both due justice and the right to a good life. Underlying these educational and ethical directives, I would argue, is the spirit of protection: Protection is a beautiful idea, conjoining action from love that yields a sense of safety in others.

Endnotes

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About the Author



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A Practical Utopian Agenda

Guy Dauncey

The debate about convivial vs. neo-protectionist conservation is fascinating, since we each bring a different perspective. Mine is practical utopian politics. Practical, because it needs to work; utopian, because we all dream of an Earth in which nature is restored; political, because that is how things get done.

First, the sickening reality: since 1970, we have lost 60% of the world's mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles.¹ Insect populations are crashing, including the bees on which we depend for pollination. Rivers and lakes are being polluted, and if we do not get a handle on our plastic wastes, by 2050 the world's oceans will have more plastic in them than fish.²

Every day, nature loses 80,000 acres of tropical rainforest, along with 135 plant, animal, and insect species.³ Why? Because the indigenous forest dwellers have no recognized land rights, because the small forest-hackers and the big corporate clear-cutters follow the same impulse to maximize personal and corporate gain, and because they meet little regulatory resistance.

In my own backyard on Vancouver Island, the temperate rainforests are being clear-cut and stripped of their biodiversity; their soils are washed into the ocean with each big winter storm, turning the sea brown. Why? Because the big forest corporations work to maximize financial yields, biodiversity laws are almost nonexistent, and captured regulators do their bidding.

On farmlands around the world, industrial farming is destroying soils and biodiversity, decreasing productivity, wiping out insects and birds, draining aquifers, and polluting creeks, rivers, and oceans.⁴ Why? Because most of the world's fields, ranches, and orchards are owned by big agri-food corporations or investment funds, which operate to maximize yields to

investors, and because, as above, biodiversity laws are almost nonexistent and captured regulators do their bidding.⁵

In the oceans, more than a third of the marine mammals are threatened with extinction.⁶ Why? Because the big Japanese, Thai, Norwegian, American, Chinese, French, and Spanish corporate fishing fleets venture ever further and deeper out to sea. Their bottom trawling is the single greatest threat to ocean biodiversity, even though the economic value of high seas fisheries is only 0.5% of the \$75 billion value of marine fish caught globally. Offshore fishing accounts for just 5% of the global catch, but it is here that the most ecological harm takes place. Just five nations—China, Spain, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea—take 85% of the catch.⁷ If crews were paid fair wages, instead of working as forced or slave labor, and if the \$4 billion a year of high seas fishing subsidies were removed, most offshore fishing would no longer be profitable.⁸ The solution proposed by Enric Sala, who leads National Geographic's Pristine Seas project, is to turn the entire high seas into a marine protected area, free from fishing of every kind, and off-limit to all destructive industries, including ocean mining.⁹ Currently, only 2.2% of the ocean is protected, a far cry from the 30% scientists say we need to ensure a healthy ocean by 2030.

Sala's proposal would protect 66% of the ocean. Experience in Marine Protected Areas shows that the ocean would regenerate within ten years, filling the barren waters with an abundance of sea life, and the spillover into coastal waters would increase the catch for convivially organized community fishers.¹⁰ It would be a win-win for everyone. A very limited version of an Ocean Treaty is currently being negotiated at the UN, but it faces relentless foot-dragging and resistance from the nations which host the predatory corporations.¹¹

What do these examples tell us for the Great Transition? Seven things:

- (1) That convivial conservation bringing lasting land stewardship is needed in local areas, as Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher propose;
- (2) That a thousand regulatory battles must be fought and won, from banning bee-killing neonicotinoid pesticides to ending deep-ocean trawling;
- (3) That national and global legislation must be advanced to recognize ecocide as a crime and give legal rights to Nature, as is beginning to happen;

4) That corporate powers must be challenged and fought, biodiversity-destructive subsidies must be ended, and trade agreements which defend investors while ignoring nature and the climate must be resisted;

(5) That global biodiversity treaties must be signed that have teeth and intention;

(6) That most of these tasks are specific and hands-on, and need our individual effort and attention;

(7) That we must learn how to tell a story to the world in which our collective work enables the full restoration of nature by 2050, inspiring people to get involved.

Most of this brings us back to politics, and the need for activists and politicians who will understand the issues, write the bills, and push for their enactment against selfish resistance from those who care only about their money and power.

There is so much to do, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. We should not underestimate the power of the world's civic organizations, however. For every challenge, people are working hard to win victories. Most are unsung heroes. In the Philippines, Colombia, India, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, and other countries, people are being assassinated for their efforts.¹²

There are so many examples of successful restoration. There is the restoration of the vast arid wasteland in the Loess Plateau in north-central China that is lifting millions out of poverty. There is the restoration of Morgan Freeman's Mississippi ranch, which has become a bee sanctuary; of Pamela and Anil Malhotra's dry, deserted farmland in Southern India, which has become an oasis with an abundance of trees and elephants; of John and Molly Chester's almost dead farm outside Los Angeles, which has become an ecologically diverse feast of species and food, shown in the Netflix movie *Biggest Little Farm*; of Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell's farm in Knepp, Sussex, England, which has become an ecological paradise with free-roaming cattle, ponies, pigs, deer, and extraordinary increases in wildlife diversity.¹³ Judith Schwartz's *The Reindeer Chronicles and Other Inspiring Stories of Working with Nature to Heal the Earth* is full of inspiring stories.

The struggle between selfish dominators and caring cooperators is as old as time. The stakes have never been higher, however, because our technologies are so much more powerful, from feller buncher machines that can fell an acre of forest in less than a day to industrial trawlers that can sweep an entire marine ecosystem off the ocean floor.

The challenge we face is not just to suppress the dominators. It is to end the belief that the forests and fish are “things” that we can harvest to satisfy our greed, and to embrace instead the understanding, deep within our hearts, that all Nature is alive, and in need of our help.

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Give Back Stolen Land

Ashley Dawson

In a May 2021 article in *The Atlantic* magazine entitled “Return the National Parks to the Tribes,” Native American author and activist David Treuer details the genocidal violence through which Native American tribes were expelled from some of the US’s earliest and most famous national parks.¹ He begins with the story of the Mariposa Battalion, a white militia composed largely of miners who came upon the Yosemite Valley in 1851 during an expedition to hunt and kill members of California’s Miwok tribes. The militia set fire to Miwok wigwams and shot people as they fled, ultimately driving the tribes from Yosemite. Thirty-nine years later, Yosemite became the first national park, the crown jewel in what would become a continent-spanning archipelago of parks. Purged of Native Americans, the parks could be celebrated by John Muir and other conservationists as Edenic “wild gardens,” an influential paradigm of conservation that resonates around the world to this day. Viewed from the perspective of history, Treuer notes laceratingly, America’s national parks are a crime scene.

How should the nation atone for this violence against Native Americans? And how can the US National Park system cope with crippling challenges of overcrowding, habitat loss, and lack of adequate scientific research? Treuer provides a solution: return the parks to those who once inhabited and sustainably stewarded them—Native Americans. It’s a simple demand: give the stolen land back.

For a reader unfamiliar with Native American political movements, Treuer’s suggestion may come across as quite radical, linked to the kind of challenges to settler colonial commonsense articulated in recent years.² Yet however one might feel about such broader decolonial demands, it is important to note that Treuer’s suggestion echoes the demands of a broader global movement for indigenous rights.

As Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher argue in their essay, the conservation movement has not exactly been respectful of indigenous land rights, either historically or in the present. Roughly 17 percent of the Earth's land is sequestered in "protected areas," which—like Yosemite—are constitutively established to exclude human beings. And powerful conservation organizations such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the World Wildlife Fund, and the Wildlife Conservation Society, headquartered in core capitalist nations, are lobbying for a doubling of these protected areas over the current decade. As frontline indigenous activists and allied groups such as Survival International have underlined, this project is in effect a massive land grab, a dispossession that can only be called colonial.

Although I find very little with which to disagree in Büscher and Fletcher's essay, the one issue that I think they could emphasize more forcefully is the violent character of dominant conservation practices. In a telling moment in their essay, Büscher and Fletcher trace the origins of "fortress conservation" to the model that arose in North America in the late 1800s and early 1900s, which, according to them, "sought to protect natural areas from the impacts of rapid industrialization, while allowing such industrialization to continue elsewhere." This account is accurate, as far as it goes, but it glides over the genocidal violence that constituted "natural areas" as available conservation space in the first place. As Treuer's account of the founding of Yosemite makes clear, one cannot talk about conservation in the US without also talking about settler colonialism. Mainstream conservation, in other words, is a mode of dispossession. Büscher and Fletcher would likely agree with me on this point, but it's important not to soft-pedal the argument, for historical accounts have strong contemporary implications.

In addition, by situating the origins of conservation in North America, Büscher and Fletcher elide the explicitly imperialist roots of conservation. Conservation as a discourse and practice began in the British colonies, when the hyper-exploitation of the natural world that characterized the plantation economies of the Caribbean islands and of India's tropical forests by the British Navy's insatiable hunger for lumber led to an alarmed recognition of unsustainability on the part of imperial functionaries.³ Wholesale forest clearance was visibly changing local climates in these places, as well as destroying valuable "natural resources," and the answer was scientific management of the forests to ensure that they would continue to

yield resources seen as valuable by the colonial power.

The first and most paradigmatic model for global conservation, according to historians, was the Indian Forest Act of 1865. With this law, the British Raj claimed the right to declare any land in India covered with trees the property of the colonial government. In one fell swoop, the customary rights of millions of Indian people to the forests that they had managed sustainably for centuries were revoked. The Imperial Forest Department was empowered to penalize and even imprison anyone caught collecting wood, foraging for game, or engaging in any of the other myriad customary uses to which Indian people had put the country's forests for millennia.

The dispossession of the forest commons in the name of conservation continues today. A report released by Survival International on International Women's Day documents how Adivasi (indigenous) women in India are being brutally persecuted for defending their lands against a massive corporate and government mining rush.⁴ Draconian anti-terrorism laws are used to silence Adivasi women land defenders, who are fighting to protect their land from mining projects slated to increase India's coal production to one billion tons per year. Similar forms of violent dispossession, in which campaigns of assassination against activists are common, are unfolding around the globe today.⁵ All too often, the "protected areas" designated by big conservation organizations include concessionary zones for precisely such socially and environmentally destructive extractive industries.⁶

Around the world, indigenous people and their claims to land rights are the major forces that stand in the way of corporations and governments caught up in this extractivist frenzy. Proposed expansions of exclusionary, fortress conservation zones would dispossess hundreds of millions of people. In 2020, the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) released a study showing that more than 300 million people live in unprotected "key biodiversity areas" that cover 9 percent of the planet.⁷ The UN recognizes that indigenous people protect 80 percent of the world's remaining biodiversity, often on land over which they have customary title—a form of ownership that states in both core capitalist and postcolonial nations are all too happy to ignore. Scientific studies have shown that indigenous practices provide the same or better levels of ecosystem support and protection as "protected areas."⁸

The transformation of these areas into exclusionary fortress-style conservation reserves would undo decades of struggle and substantial victories by indigenous people. Powerful mobilizations among indigenous and traditional peoples in the 1970s and 1980s challenged the exclusionary foundations of conservation. These political movements asserted the primacy of their customary rights to land over the dispossession carried out by states. In turn, some countries initiated reforms to recognize these rights legally.⁹ For example, Brazil's post-authoritarian constitution of 1988 recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional lands, recognition which opened the way for formal titling of large areas of the Brazilian Amazon to customary rights-holders. On an international level, political campaigns led to the recognition of customary rights of indigenous peoples to lands, territories, and resources, as well as to the restitution of lands taken from them without prior, informed consent. The struggle for the recognition of these rights featured prominently in the negotiations that led to the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).¹⁰

This political pressure led conservation organizations to recognize the importance of what was referred to as "community-based natural resource management" (CBNRM) by indigenous peoples and other local communities. The outcome of this shift included community-based wildlife management programs such as Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program, community forestry programs in countries like Mexico and Nepal, and locally managed marine areas in the South Pacific. Prominent conservation organizations recognized the rights of indigenous peoples in documents such as the Durban Action Plan, an outcome of the 2003 IUCN World Parks Conference, which called for indigenous representation in Protected Area management and restitution of land taken from indigenous people without their free and informed consent to establish protected areas. In 2010, the CBD adopted the Aichi Targets on Biodiversity, which described both protected areas and "other effective area-based conservation measures" (OECMs) as ways to safeguard ecosystems, with the latter category potentially including indigenous and community-managed lands.

Nonetheless, most reforms of protected-area legislation since the World Parks Congress in 2003 are focused on enabling co-management of reserves or on making provisions for communities

that already own land to include their territory in national protected-area systems. There is not a single country where protected-area laws recognize community land ownership.¹¹

The idea that mainstream conservation—which should be seen clearly as a form of colonialism—will reverse the sixth extinction is an illusion, one carefully cultivated by the corporations and governments that happily bankroll the big conservation NGOs. In the face of mounting environmental and social calamities, the only coherent stance must be to join indigenous and local communities around the world in demanding the return of stolen land, respect for their sovereignty, and a radical transformation of the CO₂ colonialism that characterizes the unsustainable behavior and policies of the wealthy.

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The Danger of Cooptation

Shiba Desor

Participants in the discussion have raised several points with which I wholeheartedly agree, particularly about the need for a more forceful acknowledgment within such narratives of existing convivial approaches of indigenous peoples and others. I would like to add a point about the flexibility of language in conservation policy and dangers of co-option in relation to the model Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher proposed.

It is important to acknowledge that the two critiqued models of neoprotectionism and new conservation, while presented as polar opposites, in reality may tend to coincide and co-exist on the same landscape and be implemented by the same body. The following examples show not only the striking lack of a consistent set of ethos in driving policy and implementation but also how it has become possible to stick almost any label to any model.

For instance, in the “strictly” protected areas (especially Tiger Reserves) of India, while local communities are evicted or slated for relocation, landscape management and human interference by powerful players for ecotourism intensively continue. These “new conservation” activities may be even justified as offering a source of livelihood for neighboring human populations. Another example is how “new conservation” ideas of market mechanisms and rambunctious gardens get incorporated into neoprotectionist ideas like “Nature Needs half.” In India, Sanctuary Nature Foundation is implementing a model where farmers are made to leave their “unprofitable” farmland wild and instead secure a livelihood by running homestays. These are named Community Owned Community Operated Nature (COCOON) Conservancies and at the same time pushed as a model for helping India achieve its “Nature Needs Half” goals. In both these examples, it is the existing patterns of local use for subsistence by forest-dependent communities that are attacked and vilified.

In proposing a “conservation revolution,” there is thus a danger in insufficiently outlining the ethos. While such detail is obviously beyond the scope of a short essay, even Büscher and Fletcher’s [book](#) does not delve sufficiently into values, worldviews, and approaches behind the existing marginalized alternative models of conservation, models that are often spearheaded by local and indigenous peoples. The convivial conservation model proposed does acknowledge (though perhaps not sufficiently or emphatically) the existence and importance of “local, indigenous movements” and calls for an ethic of “decolonization and redistribution.” Yet, the framing and the phrasing of a top-down prescriptive “We must...” confuses the matter. For example, speaking in the same breath of transferring ownership to local people, co-ownership, and co-management, without acknowledging the extremely different pathways and environmental justice implications of the three, leads to the possibility of taking a path that is less revolution and more continuation of status quo or greenwashing. Similarly, the concept of Conservation Basic Income, while well-intended, could be a double-edged sword without clearly specifying where exactly the power should lie for identifying and disbursing. This is not meant to be a critique of the authors’ work, but merely a caution about the possibilities of co-option it presents and the danger of future policy changes paying lip service to this model with continued tokenism in terms of local participation.

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Focus on Ecosystem Health

James Aronson, Neva Goodwin, Adam Cross, and Laura Orlando

Conservation, along with ecological restoration and stewardship-oriented and “convivial conservation”—in the sense of Bram Büscher and Rob Fletcher’s opening essay—must be approached together, at landscape and at ecoregional scales.¹ More broadly, conservation, restoration, and ecosystem management should be conceptualized, sited, and implemented on the basis of stewardship and the clear notion of a “continuum” of restorative activities.² This can best be done by addressing ecosystem health and human population health together, since the two are inexorably linked in today’s crowded and human-dominated world.³

Conservation in isolation has failed to protect the majority of the Earth’s land area. A heart-wrenching 75% of it is degraded according to a 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.⁴ While it is valuable to continue drawing a distinction between the different activities of conservation (trying to protect and actively maintain endangered species and ecosystems) and restoration (repairing ecosystems, or helping the healing process for recovery of ecosystem health), conservation needs to be part of a larger matrix that includes the restoration of degraded and fragmented ecosystems and the transition towards ecosystem management approached with an “inside-out” perspective.⁵ As the originators of this phrase, David Waltner-Toews et al. put it: “Environmental management has traditionally considered humans as external to ‘pristine’ ecosystems, but growing awareness of the complexity of ecosocial systems shows this approach to be unrealistic. When management decisions are made, people must be considered as integral to ecological systems.”

Restoration represents the most viable and effective mechanism to conserve ecosystems—for example, to restore buffers around remnant habitats, reconnect isolated patches, improve

habitat quality, and establish new habitat. Moreover, it can repair, rectify, and recover mutually beneficial interactions between humans and more-than-human nature.⁶ We are experiencing a concurrent global crisis in human health, including mental and emotional well-being. We need to address these crises together. This can be achieved by adopting “ecohealth”—an ecosystem approach to human health—as a model and practical approach to help advance the movement toward healing our planet and ourselves.⁷

Both degradation and restoration are processes, not just single events or entities. The process of ecological restoration offers concrete, practical ways to act upon the shared sense of urgency and determination to turn from ecological destruction to restoration. This brings us back to Büscher and Fletcher’s call for an “alternative framework emphasizing democratic processes and engagement with nature, along with participation in forms of public discourse and action matched to the systemic change we need.” Conservation, restoration, and participatory management of ecosystems (i.e., from the inside-out) are not only hands-on forms of “engagement with nature,” but also reciprocally restorative practices: restorative for the people involved as well as for the ecosystems undergoing restorative actions. This has enormous socio-economic and cultural benefits.

We must, of course, be on the lookout for the terrible mishmash of actions that are currently labeled or greenwashed as “restoration.” While some may be quite legitimate when undertaken in the right context, many things that today are called restoration (e.g., subsidized or speculative afforestation with fast-growing, non-native trees under the banner of carbon capture) should not be included under the label ecological restoration. The notions of a restorative continuum and families of restorative actions can provide clarification. Remember, restoration is a process on an arc toward health; examples include processes that result in healthy soils on regenerative organic farms, native plant and tree populations in agroforestry, and thriving children in urban restoration sites.

Given the growing interconnectedness of human population health—or ill-health—and ecosystem health or ill-health, ecological restoration and ecohealth should be the new banners and flag-bearers for a paradigm shift pointing humanity towards a restorative culture.⁸

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Theorizing Deep Change

Annie James

From an anti-capitalist perspective, "convivial conservation"—as articulated by Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher—provides a refreshing and thorough perspective on the problems plaguing the many forms of conservation prevalent today.¹ It seems impossible to argue against its key propositions: an alternative conservation practice must break away from capitalism and must reject a separation of nature and society. Many agree that the historical specificity of capitalist relations has led us to this moment of multiple crises (ecological and social) and that these relations rely upon and intensify the separation of humans and other-than-human natures. We see similar theorizations offered when discussing other issues e.g., global warming and the depletion of fisheries.²

On Breaking away from Capitalism?

If capitalism is at its heart an ideological project whose tentacles move in capricious ways, where do we start with cutting off ties? There are, of course, localized resistances (including in my own country India) that David Harvey terms "militant particularisms," but we are evidently far away from a national or global articulation of anti-capitalism (or post-capitalism) that can acquire the critical mass needed to reach transformative tipping points.³ And importantly, who (first) breaks away from capitalism? For some communities living in conservation/biodiversity hotspots, markets and privatization are no longer a remote prospect but a reality around the corner that some resist, others desire. In the capitalist core, radical scholars are asking for degrowth and convivialism—ideas that challenge what the "over-developed" West has defined as a "good life," premised on acquiring more material wealth while offshoring its waste and exploitative labor processes to the other side.⁴ Is there sufficient political momentum in the Global North for these earnest programs of radical economic change to take off—in time and in socially just ways?

In the context of conservation, Ashley Dawson argues a good starting point would be to ask the Global North to pay its due for its historical and continued overuse of the world's forests, oceans, and atmosphere—a climate and biodiversity debt. Advocating an idea also entertained by Büscher and Fletcher, Dawson says “a universal income guaranteed for the inhabitants of these [biodiversity] hotspots would create a genuine counterweight to the attractions of poaching, and would entitle indigenous and forest-dwelling peoples who make these zones of rich biodiversity their homes with the economic and political power to push their governments to implement significant conservation measures.”⁵ This makes much practical sense, but it is not an easy sell. So far, even the \$100 billion climate finance promised in 2009 to developing countries at Copenhagen hasn't materialized—a continued point of contention between these country blocs.⁶ Such failings reduce joint agreements such as the one recently moderated by the UNFCCC in Glasgow to hollow rhetoric. Instead, we see newer alliances to financialize more nature/biodiversity, turning it into capital—arguably harkening back to the devil who tempted us all the way here in the first place.⁷

On Nature and Society – Same But Different?

All of this debate on whether to break from capitalism or embrace it in the “Anthropocene” comes down to perceptions of who we really are. No, we are not separate from nature. Here the neoprotectionist perspective falls somewhat flat. The idea of protecting nature from humans (or nature from itself if humans are part of nature, as they must surely be) seems absurd. But is it really so—especially when increasingly (many) humans are alienated from themselves and from the impact they have on the rest of nature? The argument that protected areas should “exclude or strictly regulate humans with traditions bent upon the appropriation, exploitation, and aggressive management of nature” hence seems irrefutable. Unfortunately, despite best intentions, the track record of from whom nature is protected is discouraging. Often, it is communities who have traditionally lived in areas considered worthy of protection (e.g., tropical forests, mangroves etc.) that are evicted and displaced. Ironically, it is the worldviews such communities hold and the ways-of-being they embody that have kept many such areas ecologically intact and biodiverse.⁸ The question of who is kept separate thus looms large in conservation.

The Theoretical Point OR the Point of Theory

For academically "mainstreaming" conservation's connection to capitalism and its reinforcement of nature and society dualism, convivial conservation deserves credit. However, what this proposal means for a coherent anti-capitalist movement and for addressing the extinction crisis requires further unpacking. How can such theories provide practical inspiration (and advice) to communities in the Global South struggling against the dispossession of their lands and to social movements in the North demanding climate justice and climate action? The value of any theory (especially in times of crisis) lies in the action it inspires. In that spirit, I hope that theoretical projects of the kind discussed here can do the following:

- (1) Translate into supporting not just the territorial and rights claims of forest-dependent and indigenous communities but also their worldviews. In that sense, theory must directly speak to and promote these worldviews and the agency sustaining these worlds.
- (2) Offer concrete tools for a social and ecological revolution that many seem to talk about, but that has long been in the waiting. Do we then need the collective weight of the academic left to support direct action and sabotage against extractivist and polluting infrastructures/entities?⁹

Finally, even if it appears somewhat unrelated, I hope that theoretical projects in conviviality and eco-socialism prompt the academic and the researcher-activist world to take a hard look inwards and to re-evaluate the neoliberal practices we support as a community in academia and beyond, the power-(im)balances that benefit our voices over that of others, and the privileged spaces we occupy at the intersection of research and policy (and how we utilize those). It is no longer possible to consider the struggles against extinction or climate denialism as separate from the one we need to undertake in our everyday acts. It is in that sense that theory becomes truly radical because it goes to the root of where all change must begin. Ourselves.

Endnotes

1. Here I include an elaboration of the concept in their book *Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2020).
2. Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2020); Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).
3. See David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); George Monbiot, "After the Failure of Cop26, There's Only One Last Hope for Our Survival," *Guardian*, November 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/14/cop26-last-hope-survival-climate-civil-disobedience>.
4. Giorgos Kallis, "In Defence of Degrowth," *Ecological Economics* 70 (2011): 873–880, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.12.007>; Convivialist International, "The Second Convivialist Manifesto: Towards a Post-Neoliberal World," *Civic Sociology* 1, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.12721>.
5. Quote is from Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York: OR Books, 2016), 91; Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, "Conservation Basic Income: A Non-Market Mechanism to Support Convivial Conservation," *Biological Conservation* 244 (2020).
6. Jocelyn Timperley, "The Broken \$100-Billion Promise of Climate Finance—and How to Fix It?" *Nature*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02846-3>.
7. John Bellamy Foster, "Nature as a Mode of Accumulation: Capitalism and the Financialization of the Earth," *Monthly Review* 73, no. 10 (March 2022), https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-073-10-2022-03_1.
8. ICCA Consortium, *Territories of Life: 2021 Report* (ICCA Consortium, 2021), <https://report.territoriesoflife.org/>.
9. Andreas Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (New York: Verso, 2021).

About the Author



Annie James is a doctoral student at the Institute of Environmental Science & Technology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ICTA-UAB). She is investigating ideas within anti/post-capitalism and eco-socialism as they apply to forest conservation practices, using forests in Western India as her empirical base. She aims to conceptualize alternatives to mainstream conservation, situating them within the broader demand for an anti-capitalist transformation. She has previously worked in India with civil society organizations focused on social and environmental justice. She holds an MA from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.



Respecting the More-Than-Human World

Lisi Krall

Conservation and how it is approached is clearly a complex matter. Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher attempt to sort that complexity by dividing conservation into conventional and convivial conservation, and then offering convivial conservation as a new alternative. We are told that convivial conservation rejects “both nature-culture dichotomy and growth-centric capitalism” while conventional conservation includes groups that are either supportive of or ambiguous about growth-centric capitalism, and may or may not extend the nature-culture dichotomy. Here I want to focus on the claim that the neoprotectionists replicate the nature-culture dichotomy with their “fortress” model approach. Using this framework, Büscher and Fletcher draw a dividing line between the neoprotectionists and conservation efforts that work toward creating a more harmonious relationship between humans and Earth.¹

This is the reality of where we stand: There presently exists an undeniable duality between humans and the more-than-human world. That duality is embedded in the structure and dynamic of an economic system that now organizes the material reproduction of the vast majority of humans on Earth. The economic system functions as if it is not connected to the Earth; at the same time, it is a foundationally material matter. This duality is a significant trend in the human/Earth relationship. While one can certainly argue that humans are “predisposed to connect with all life,” it is equally important to recognize that our social and economic evolution has taken us in a direction of a systemic disconnect from Earth. In this sense, it is quite possible that confronting the extinction crisis might be tantamount to confronting the complexity of our own evolutionary history, but that is the matter of a different conversation.²

Büscher and Fletcher tell us that the neoprotectionists “believe the only way to stave off collapse of the Earth’s life-supporting ecosystems is to protect nature from people” and by

doing so they have an “unrealistic faith in the possibility of separating our way out of the problem” and “affirm the split” between humans and nature. I would say these claims are not correct, but it is true that neoprotectionists confront the present duality in a specific way. Duality now places humans on the upper neck of their exponential growth curves with a concomitant mass extinction of other species. Büscher and Fletcher are right in saying the neoprotectionists need to confront capitalism, but the neoprotectionists do recognize that there have to be limits to human expansion and that a thriving, self-determined more-than-human world has to actually mean something concrete. Setting aside is essential to conservation precisely because it is a recognition of the literal and ecological space needed for the rhythm and dynamic of the more-than-human world to remain manifest and flourish.³

As far as ending capitalism is concerned, it is essential to understand that if providing sufficient space for the more-than-human world depends on ending capitalism first, then the game is likely over. Setting aside is not a substitute for creating a harmonious relationship between humans and Earth, nor is it a substitute for ending capitalism as we know it, but it appears quite essential to the reality of the historical moment where there are almost 8 billion people on the planet, mass extinction in play, and a seemingly unassailable economic system in exponential flight. And just as a thought exercise, we might ask ourselves what it means to live harmoniously with the grizzly bear, for example. It simply means that there is a lot of literal and ecological space given over to the grizzly bear where we enter its domain knowing we are not the top of the food chain. Creating a harmonious relationship between humans and nature sometimes means that humans have to fall back and put the rights of the more-than-human world above our own. This is a difficult problem to navigate especially given the growth dynamic, inequality, and historical injustices of the system.

It is important to keep in mind that this systemic duality predates capitalism. Duality began with grain agriculture when humans began to be materially organized in a way that no longer embedded them in the rhythm and dynamic of the more-than-human world in their material life. Humans became dominant. With this in mind, the challenge for economic system change is something more than striving for a vaguely defined harmonious relationship between humans and Earth. Setting aside is not about us; it is about the more-than-human world, and I

sometimes think we have trouble grasping that fundamental tenet of deep ecology.

It has become popular in the discourse surrounding conservation to paint the neoprotectionists as entitled people who are insensitive to the plight of the poor and indigenous communities, mostly ignorant of capitalism, and trying to cordon off parts of the Earth for their own enjoyment. Things are not that simple. The so-called flaw in their approach might instead be viewed as an iteration toward a deeper ecology of economic order, one that recognizes that in order for the rights of the more-than-human world to be something meaningful, a certain amount of literal and ecological space is required. Where does this leave us? It leaves us to attempt to navigate questions of conservation without drawing unnecessarily divisive lines like the claim that “cordoning off immense swaths of the earth would entail unprecedented human displacement and militarized enforcement.” I don’t know any neoprotectionists who would be up for this. If there are some, they are not the majority. It seems that it might be important instead to focus on this challenge of standing back at a time when we aren’t going to end capitalism immediately. This is no easy challenge, but it must be first and foremost ecologically contextualized, which is why E. O. Wilson made the proposition he made.⁴

Endnotes

1. Critiques of the fortress model are quite popular. See most recently Rebecca Solnit, “John Muir in Native America,” *Sierra Club Magazine* (March–April 2021).

2. See Lisi Krall, *Bitter Harvest: An Inquiry into the War Between Economy and Earth* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming August 2022).

3. This is also outlined in Eileen Crist, *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

4. E. O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

About the Author



Lisi Krall is Professor of Economics at the State University of New York, Cortland. She began her academic career as a heterodox labor economist concentrating on gender issues. Her research focuses on labor economics, political economy, ecological economics, human ecology, and the evolution of economic systems. She is the author of *Proving Up: Domesticating Land in U.S. History* and *Bitter Harvest: An Inquiry into the War between Economy and Earth*. A Fulbright Scholar, SUNY Senior Scholar, and Chancellor's Award recipient, she has collaborated with the Evolution Institute, the Foundation for Deep Ecology, the Post Carbon Institute, the Population Institute, the International Forum on Globalization, and the Land Institute. She holds a PhD from the University of Utah.



Urban Grassroots

Orion Kriegman

Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher point to the need for profound systemic change if we are to ensure the integrity of our natural world and its ability to regenerate so that future generations may thrive. The ecological emergency is now; further delay only intensifies the crisis. The core question for all our efforts at protecting biodiversity is how to create a virtuous feedback loop that (1) supports nature's regeneration *and* (2) generates stronger political will.

Clearly social transformation can take years of preparation, building solidarity among the constituency advocating for change. This work requires daily habit building as well as mobilizations and political strategies. Yet, when the dam bursts, mainstream adoption of new values and institutions can happen quickly, sometimes virtually overnight (see gay marriage or the fall of the Berlin Wall). The Great Transition framework asserts that human history is punctuated by collective action seizing the possible from the jaws of the probable; with pragmatic hope, we can catalyze collective action powerful enough to bend the arc of history toward a thriving planetary civilization. As with other aspects of the GT, the concept of "convivial conservation" begs the question: how?

Cities might not be the obvious place to begin if our goal is large-scale habitat conservation and transformation of industrial agriculture. However, as the urban habitat is where we encounter the most people in their daily routines, working in cities is critical for generating the politics for change. This work will look different in different parts of our world as there are different cultural and economic challenges.

Using my work as the example with which I am most familiar, the Boston Food Forest Coalition ([BFFC](#)) aims to endow healthy food forests as part of the renewable green infrastructure of

Boston. In fifty years time, at a slow and steady rate of growth, this could mean more than a hundred food forests have taken root throughout the city (each with their own annual harvest festivals and cultural events). Every healthy food forest park is a garden of connectivity, renewing community leadership for adaptation and resilience, and signifies a cultural realignment of urban life with the natural world, creating nourishing relationships between neighbors, land, and food. Together, we are asking a vital question: How do we embody the ideal of the “beloved community” (in which all people are cherished and nurtured) as we engage gracefully with the work of realigning humanity with nature?

BFFC responds to the global crisis by inviting people to join together in the adventure of adapting our lives, urban infrastructure, economic relations, and mental models to create a thriving future for future generations in harmony with the web of life. BFFC makes this journey tangible and immediate, planting trees today that will bear fruit for decades. BFFC embodies a new culture (e.g., collective land ownership), teaches new practices, and grows a learning community. The food production aspect of food forests is not the only way to do urban agriculture, but it is a particularly innovative way to bring ecological agriculture principles into the city to grow more per square foot than conventional agriculture does in terms of food crops while creating space for nature to live side-by-side with humans.

The beauty of BFFC is that it is not just about food and urban agriculture; it is about exercising the “Democracy Muscle” through collective action. Growing the commons by planting new food forests is weaving a web of mutual aid among neighbors, city officials, and local leaders. As Boston transforms, so do other cities in a global effort to realign lifestyles and the infrastructure that supports new ways of living with the natural world. Nature’s capacity to regenerate the complex web of life is truly astonishing.

BFFC emerges from grassroots energy, and this energy is always deeply personal. In my case, I have two young daughters, 6 and 9 years old, and like all children, they are in love with their world and thrilled to be discovering its nuances and complexity. It is important to emphasize that they are also realizing that they are inheriting a world in crisis. I believe having tangible examples of the adults in their world coming together and trying to face that crisis head-on is critical. Yes, the climate is changing, and we don’t know what’s going to grow here in the

future. The only way we're going to figure that out is by getting out there and experimenting and doing the observations and the citizen science and rebuilding cities so that they are in balance with nature, and then lead the way in terms of how to get involved and do that work. That is what I want to see now and in the future. I want to see more connection to the next generation, more ability to bring them along and say, "Welcome to the world you're inheriting, and we're not just gifting you a crisis; we're also gifting you our best efforts and ways to come up with continued sustainable solutions." This, for me, is the locus of the needed work of systems change and cultural transformation.

About the Author



Orion Kriegman is the founding Executive Director of the Boston Food Forest Coalition and played a major role in the conception of Egleston Community Orchard in Jamaica Plain, which was the first food forest site to be adopted into the BFFC land trust. He has a background directing community-organizing work at Jamaica Plain New Economy Transition (JPNET). Prior to the creation of BFFC, he coordinated the Great Transition Initiative at the Tellus Institute and worked as a Project Officer for Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP), a learning network which gathers lessons about peace-building efforts in internal armed conflicts. He holds a Master's in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School.



Building Radical Consensus

Diana Pound

There is so much with which I agree in Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher's essay, but with limited time, I will provide a few thoughts and then explain my approach to what might be described as a form of "convivial conservation."

Both their critique of capitalism and description of various conservation paradigms rooted in colonialism are about Western approaches. It is important to recognize other places and peoples working to care for nature see, value, and do things differently.

Capitalism is not the only political/economic system that damages nature. Accrual of wealth by exploitation of people and nature is at the heart of an array of state-based political/economic systems, including capitalism, communism, and imperialism. Who holds the wealth may differ (rich and famous, corporates, the state, a dictator, or royalty), but the impact on nature and people ends up the same. Working to change these systems to something better is an exceedingly long-term proposition. If convivial conservation asserts that "success in the conservation arena requires transforming the overarching global political economy," we are out of time, and there won't be success. When "the house is on fire," the focus is on how best to put the fire out as quickly as possible—not the governance of the fire service. Those with the skill and clout to work at influencing the global political economy and global conservation paradigms must do so, but the focus has to be on how we can get on better trajectories and to better outcomes for nature and people now—last week, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

In the UK, there seems little awareness amongst environmental professionals that the roots of conservation practice here are in fortress conservation and colonialism. I mentioned it in a recent blog for the UK Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM)

and was asked to explain what I meant.¹ Whether self-aware or not, these attitudes are still quite evident, particularly in the rewilding endeavor (a more male-dominated strand of UK conservation, which I suspect is no coincidence). But the problems extend beyond this paradigm. Back in 2003 at a gathering of the European part of the IUCN Commission for Education and Communication (CEC), a challenging conclusion was that one of the greatest threats to biodiversity conservation is the attitudes and behavior of conservationists. This includes linear and silo thinking; an “experts know best, so experts decide” mentality; scientism with the natural sciences seen as the only way of knowing; top-down approaches telling others what to do; black box methods; and a belief that the answer is to educate “them” and then make them rationally analyze (our) options. All these need to change—and fast.

I too share grave concerns about the “nature at our service” paradigm of ecosystem services, but in certain limited settings and contexts, it has its uses.² For example, in England, if farmers are to stop operating on the production model that causes terrible damage to life support for humans and nature, they need income from creating and nurturing healthy landscape-scale habitats, regenerated soils, clean rivers, flood mitigation, clean air, and recreation access. With subsidies coming from the taxpayer, there has to be some fair way of calculating this. Likewise for making the cost/benefit case for natural coastal fringes or river management as part of better flood protection compared to large concrete structures.

When it comes to convivial conservation, some of us have been doing work that could be described this way for a while. Our team at Dialogue Matters design and facilitate multi-stakeholder consensus-building and negotiation related to the natural environment. By “consensus-building,” I don’t mean weak compromise; I mean stakeholders working hard to seek out win/wins for nature and all the different stakeholders and interests: looking for “both and” solutions and innovations. We have completed over 130 multistakeholder projects at local, national, and international levels. Some are collaborative research; others, better management of land, sea, rivers, species conservation, landscapes, fisheries, farming, water management, and climate change.

We help people come together across sectors, parts of society, and interests to combine their understanding of their part of the system and work out the optimum way forward for nature and people. Solutions can be a mix of technical, spatial, behavioral, market, operational, managerial, and governance. Outcomes are across the range for nature: areas left alone to nature, areas where local people and traditional practices are a fundamental part of how the ecosystem works, areas for active restoration or self-willed wilding, to greening highly altered urban areas. All are needed, but should not be imposed.

When I said above that I want to focus on what can be done now—last week, yesterday, today and tomorrow—I meant it for real, not in an aspirational way:

Last week, we ran the first workshop to help the UK fishing sector consider the most feasible and impactful solutions to transition to net zero and deliver other benefits.

Yesterday, it was all about bat conservation commissioned by Natural England (England's government agency for nature and landscape). In the second workshop in the dialogue, participants discussed if and how the implementation of regulation should be changed. The shift would be to refocus from conservation of local bats and roosts toward measures for bat populations, their habits and prey, and a developer's levy used to deliver landscape-scale conservation measures, strategies, research, and support for volunteer roles. Participants included scientists, regulators, conservation charities, local authority ecologists, custodians of historic buildings from the church and National Trust, local bat conservation volunteers, developers, and ecological consultants. Together, they shared knowledge and ideas and then explored the pros and cons and action steps for their shared priorities. Previously resisted by some, there was a consensus that significant change was necessary—of course with caution about what exactly those changes end up looking like and an ask that the changes are developed collaboratively.

Today, we are completing a Tree Strategy for Jersey (UK Crown Dependency). In that dialogue, we had farmers, nature conservationists, arboriculturists, people responsible for roads and infrastructure, developers, tree nurseries, heritage, local community voices, young people, and many others. They co-created the contents of the strategy which we have written, using their words as much as possible. The resulting strategy is by the people of Jersey for Jersey's people,

trees, woodland, hedgerows, and wildlife. This is no top-down imposition by a few experts telling everyone else what to do and overlooking intricate system connections and effects.

Tomorrow, we are continuing a project called “Quantocks Futures” a protected landscape that will lose iconic beech trees and other features to climate change. Multiple stakeholders, supported by wider community input, are exploring how best to adapt to these and other changes and make the most of their treasured landscape for well-being, livelihoods, and nature.

Delivering these deliberative consensus-building processes involves a great deal of design: who is in the core deliberations; any wider engagement to feed into that; mapping out questions, techniques, flows of knowledge, decision points, and then facilitating to enable points to be taken on merit not the status, power, or behavior of who said what. This encourages greater systems thinking, builds trust and understanding across differences, and—crucially—momentum for change.

Great outcomes can come even when people have very different values and politics if they work together in a principled and collaborative way—not one side trying to educate or change the other but co-designing what change looks like and how they will each play their part to deliver it. Our best commissions are when we can help people co-design the change and co-produce it too.

For me, that is what a great transition approach to biodiversity conservation looks like... today!

Endnotes

1. Diana Pound, “What does Transformative Change Mean?,” Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), December 22, 2021, <https://cieem.net/what-does-transformative-change-mean-diana-pound-cenv-fcieem/>.

2. Diana Pound, “The Eco...What Approach?,” <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1241484> ch?,” International Association of Landscape Ecologists Conference Proceedings, 2011, <https://ecosystemsknowledge.net/sites/default/files/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Pound-RGS-2013.pdf>.

About the Author



Diana Pound is the founder and managing director of Dialogue Matters, which conducts stakeholder engagement for environmental projects. She works on integrated management of land, sea, and rivers; species conservation; climate research prioritization; water and energy futures; food security; and sea governance. Working in 28 countries, she has trained 2,500 people and advised national and international organizations. She was awarded the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (CEC) Award for Excellence in West Europe in 2019. She holds an MSc in landscape ecology, design, and maintenance from the University of London.



Towards Half-Earth Socialism

Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass

Half-Earth Socialism (HES) is a project on which we have worked over the last few years that has taken the form of several essays, a book, and a video game.¹ We believe that socialists need to take conservation seriously, while conservationists need to embrace socialism. We see our framework as a fourth branch in the environmentalist debate outlined by Bram Büscher and Rob Fletcher, on top of the proposed tripartite division of ecomodernism, neoprotectionism, and their concept of “convivial conservation.” The dividing line between our framework and “convivial conservation” is both material and philosophical: we are skeptical that “convivial” forms of conservation would protect biodiversity, and we doubt that the “nature-culture” dichotomy actually matters much in causing the environmental crisis. We are more interested in studying why capitalism engenders constant ecological disasters, surveying useful technologies and policies, and thinking practically about building ecosocialism.

The name of our project makes E. O. Wilson’s influence obvious, yet we are well aware of conservation’s colonial history.² Wilson was no angel, but he appears almost benign compared to fellow conservationists, such as David Foreman or Ian Player, who respectively collaborated with US fascists and the Apartheid government in South Africa. Despite Wilson’s odious “sociobiology,” his work on biogeography has withstood five decades of scrutiny and provides the foundation for understanding the ongoing sixth mass extinction.³ Due to the close relationship between habitat loss and biodiversity, there is no plausible way to slow extinction rates some 1,000 times higher than natural background rates without protecting ecosystems. We fear that Büscher and Fletcher’s framework avoids the basic need for intact habitat in its pursuit of conservation without social cost. It is not exactly clear to us what convivial conservation would look like in practice, but a park packed with livestock cannot be a well-

functioning ecosystem. Cattle, sheep, goats, and other domesticated creatures are hardly convivial company for countless endangered species.

We believe environmental scholars need more precise concepts to critically examine how humans interact with nature, rather than merely praising Latourian “hybridity” of nature and culture. Even on their own terms, however, Büscher and Fletcher’s dismissal of Half-Earth for its supposed Cartesianism makes little sense because rewilding has little to do with fetishizing pristine nature—the field began after all on the artificial island of Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands. It takes a great deal of labor to remove invasives, restore streams, remove dams, reintroduce extirpated species, or find close substitutes. Humanity must mix its labor with the natural world to provide the basis for a wilder Earth. We agree with Büscher and Fletcher that conservationists today should have no quarrel with indigenous sovereignty and instead ally with the Land Back movement. This is not only because it is the ethical thing to do, but also because ecosystems managed by indigenous nations tend to have higher levels of biodiversity than conventional preserves and sequester twice as much carbon.⁴

Büscher and Fletcher portray neoprotectionists as hostile to capitalism, yet they seem to be exaggerating the influence of a tiny minority. Leading neoprotectionists, such as Wilson, believe not only that Half-Earth is compatible with capitalism, but that it implicitly requires it because only oligarchs can acquire vast swathes of land for new preserves. In turn, these preserves are often money-making ventures that seek to reap carbon credits or purvey exotic beef from their bison and Tauros herds.⁵ Wilson’s allies included the oil and gas trader MC Davis and Ted Turner (who founded CNN), both of whom became barons of vast wild estates.⁶ Yet, philanthropists cannot purchase half the world (our society would be even more dystopian if they could). If neoprotectionists hope to achieve their goals of protecting biodiversity, they need to abjure their Malthusian beliefs that malign the downtrodden, spurn their wealthy backers, and join a broad progressive bloc.

We believe that a true solution to the biodiversity crisis can only be achieved in a post-capitalist society. As socialism lacks the coercive and decentralized structure of the capitalist market, a global parliament and central planners could create Half-Earth by restricting economic growth

within planetary boundaries. Conscious control over this process (rather than relying on the market) would facilitate finding the fairest way to conserve land by promoting or constricting certain industries. Some of these decisions would be impossible under capitalism because they would be woefully unprofitable. We are aware a socialist society might decide against creating Half-Earth. The grievous environmental degradation suffered in socialist eastern Europe (or more recently in China) demonstrates that socialists would not necessarily care about conservation, the welfare of the peasantry, or animal rights. Such choices must be made consciously and depend upon powerful social movements to support such goals.

In our book *Half-Earth Socialism*, we delve into how the economy can be democratically planned and restrained without recourse to market mechanisms. The book includes a simple model where one can decide between different energy and agricultural systems, as well as goals for carbon emissions and conservation, and then see if the resulting mix is feasible given land constraints. We imagine socialist democracy to be the choice between different total plans that are decided collectively at the global level. These rough-hewn plans are then translated into regional and local plans, constructed with wide autonomy yet constrained by globally determined ecological and developmental goals. Old and new planning techniques, such as linear programming and data assimilation, make it possible for humanity to collectively decide how many fields are tilled, how much carbon emitted, and how much land is rewilded.

Once we look at everything from food to energy production at the same time, it becomes possible to see some solutions. For example, if we want to achieve Half-Earth, renewable energy systems, and organic food production, then land must be wrested from animal husbandry. This conclusion becomes even more obvious if massive biofuel plantations assumed in IPCC climate models are implemented to achieve negative emissions.⁷ The hard realities of the environmental crisis stand in the way of any “convivial” answer to the land problem. Two-fifths of the world’s inhabitable surface is taken up by pasture and fodder crops to produce food we do not need, with consequences that are unethical, carbon-intensive, and prone to creating new zoonotic diseases like SARS-CoV-2.⁸ Without the meat industry, suddenly we have enough land to achieve all of our environmental goals while ensuring the good life for all. Of course, a HES society can and should differentiate the likes of Cargill and JBS, and the extraordinarily meat-intensive diets

of the global upper-class they support, from the peasants who did little to get humanity into this mess.

Unlike Büscher and Fletcher, we stress the necessarily difficult and conflictual nature of conservation. There are no easy solutions, and it is time that conservationists and ecosocialists acknowledge that. There will be much to disagree about in a socialist society, perhaps even more than our present circumstances because socialism makes visible the tradeoffs between goals more obvious than what we can discern in the opaque market. Yet it is in the creation of new, numerous, and conflicting visions of the future that socialist democracy is practiced. This is not to say that we are certain that a socialist society will choose to create Half-Earth, yet its mere possibility is something to be cherished in contrast to our current society where solutions to the environmental crisis will forever elude the blind grasp of capital.

Endnotes

1. The book is *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change, and Pandemics* (London: Verso, 2020). For an exemplary essay, see Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettese, "The Climate Crisis and Covid-19 are Inseparable," *Jacobin*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/05/climate-change-crisis-covid-coronavirus-environment>. The video game version of Half-Earth Socialism will be available in early May at the website half.earth.
2. E. O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016).
- 3 E. O. Wilson and Robert H. MacArthur, *The Theory of Island Biogeography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967)
4. For biodiversity, see Richard Schuster et al., "Vertebrate Biodiversity on Indigenous-Managed Lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada Equals that in Protected Areas," *Environmental Science & Policy* 101 (2019): 1–6. For carbon sequestration, see World Resources Institute and Climate Focus, *Sink or Swim: How Indigenous and Community Lands Can Make or Break Nationally Determined Contributions* (Bonn: Forest Declaration Assessment, 2019).
5. Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe, *Rewilding: The Radical New Science of Ecological Recovery* (London: Icon Press, 2020).
6. Tony Hiss, "Can the World Really Set Aside Half of the Planet for Wildlife?," *Smithsonian*, May 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/can-world-really-set-aside-half-planet-wildlife-180952379/>; E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, "Turner Endangered Species Fund and E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation Join Forces to Combat Extinction Crisis," press release, January 21, 2014, <https://eowilsonfoundation.org/turner-endangered-species-fund-and-e-o-wilson-biodiversity-foundation-join-forces-to-combat-extinction-crisis/>.
7. Figure 2.11 in the following IPCC report suggests that a 1.5 C compatible world under a slow decarbonization scenario (S5) would require around three India's of land to be allocated to bioenergy with carbon capture and storage by 2100: Joeri Rogelj et al., "Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5°C in the Context of Sustainable Development," *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report* (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018).
8. 40 million km² of land are dedicated to animal husbandry (including feed) of the 104 km² of global habitable land. Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Land Use," *Our World in Data*, September 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/land-use>.

About the Authors



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Authors' Response



Response to Panelists

Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher

We very much appreciate all the responses to our opening essay for this GTI Forum. We are heartened by the general agreement on the need for a different and, indeed, post-capitalist path forward for conservation, even if there are clearly different ideas about what this means. It is only through open debate across difference that we can hope to find common directions going forward. Indeed, this is why neoliberalism has been so strong: it is driven by common overarching ideas (growth, accumulation, entrepreneurialism, etc.) despite differences in operationalization. By contrast, alternative paradigms have often failed to achieve a shared direction across difference, thus undermining efforts to effect structural change.

First, we want to emphasize that we fully agree with several commenters that the land and ecosystem practices, knowledge systems, and critiques of neoliberal development generated by indigenous communities and Global South movements are central to effective conservation. While we emphasized this in our opening essay and in much of our other work, we gladly heed the important call to go much further in this regard.¹ We have had the good fortune to work with many indigenous and local community members in the Global South, and these collaborations have shaped the formulation of convivial conservation. We are deeply indebted to them as well as to the many scholars and activists who have worked to bring indigenous wisdom and practices to wider attention.

Yet our proposal is not merely “old wisdom” under a new name. First, because we do not want to appropriate others’ wisdom or voices when they can express this much more effectively. Second, because while we believe our proposal can speak to many conservation actors around the world, it is above all aimed at international policy discussions. In particular, we aim to challenge and change “mainstream,” Northern-based/funded conservation ideas and organizations, not indigenous and grassroots land and ecosystem stewardship in the Global South. Hence, we agree

with [Diana Pound](#) when she notes “when it comes to convivial conservation, I think some of us have been doing work that could be described this way for a while.” Our aim is precisely to build on and join many existing examples of convivial conservation in practice, highlighting their commonalities to advance

a broader conservation paradigm shift. In [Guy Dauncey](#)’s terms, this is a “practical utopian politics” for conservation.

In so doing, the question posed by [Alejandro Argumedo](#)—whether we need retain the label “conservation” at all—is important. [After all, our proposal](#) also broadens the narrow focus of mainstream biodiversity conservation to include decolonization and socio-ecological justice. This addresses what [Ashley Dawson](#) incisively emphasizes: mainstream conservation’s extremely violent history. Our and others’ work on “green violence,” “green wars,” and colonial conservation has highlighted this violent historical legacy and how it continues to be fueled by capitalist developments.²

Another reason for doubting the term is our emphasis on political economy. After all, if capitalism were truly sustainable, there would be no need to advocate for conservation, which would simply be endogenous to the economic system. This extends to issues such as the food system ([Eileen Crist](#)), which is problematic precisely because of its embeddedness in a global political economy oriented towards capitalist accumulation. All this means—coming back to Argumedo—the need to challenge neoliberalism and the neoliberal state. As he stresses, nurturing more autonomous spaces for communities that care for themselves and environments outside of global markets is vital.

Consequently, we agree with [Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass](#), among others, that the critique of capital is central. Our “practical utopian political” instinct counsels working with actors with varying perspectives in the process of transformation. At the same time, we must hold fast to the conviction that many institutions (Big Oil, Big Tech, Big Advertising, Big Agriculture, Big State, Big Military, etc.) are incompatible with a sustainable planet and need to be abolished. Still, transformation will arise within the capitalist system while at the same time going beyond it, which is why we frame our proposal as “post-capitalist,” not “the end of capitalism,” as [Lisi Krall](#) calls it. Like the rise of capitalism itself, moving beyond it will be highly uneven—*but move beyond it, we must*.

Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass’s proposal for “Half-Earth Socialism” makes this explicit. However, we don’t agree that the “nature-culture dichotomy” is merely an academic hobbyhorse. To the contrary, the dichotomy has concrete implications wherever conservation planners create and enforce strict protected areas. Additionally, we strongly disagree with their claim that a “park with livestock is not a well-functioning park,” given that this completely ignores how the history of park creation required (violent) expulsion of local residents and livelihoods. In fact, many parks that allow some livestock grazing function well.

In the end, a *political* proposal like convivial conservation needs to balance nuance and flexibility with strong principles and a clear direction. Hence, responding to [Shiba Desor](#), [Lisi Krall](#), and [Eileen Crist](#), we don’t simply dismiss “neoprotectionists” (or, for that matter, “new conservationists”), but earnestly engage with them. In our judgment, neoprotectionists have not been the strongest environmental justice advocates, but we appreciate how neoprotectionism and new conservation are often not opposites but “in reality may tend to often coincide and co-exist on the same landscape and be implemented by the same body” (Desor). Indeed, many actors from these divergent camps have recently come together to promote a conjoined “Nature Positive” proposal.³ We view convivial conservation in the same way: in theory, policy, and practice, all will need to balance flexibility and strong principles.

Responding to [Annie James](#), theory in this proposal must both reflect on the world and inspire actions to change it. In the process, certain goals are central, such as social justice and equity (as reflected our proposal for a Conservation Basic Income) and the preservation of biodiversity (with due attention to the need of large animals have for abundant space, as Eileen Crist emphasizes). To our pleasant surprise, forthcoming Dutch environmental planning bureau scenarios for convivial conservation, which included simulating a degrowing economy, found that it left *more space for biodiversity* more swiftly over the short term, and almost as much over the medium term, as “Half Earth” scenarios that have major negative social justice implications. Hence, we believe convivial conservation and its focus on promoted areas is *better* overall for big animals, too. In this way, it can promote global “ecohealth” as suggested by [Neva Goodwin](#), [James Aronson](#), [Adam Cross](#), and [Laura Orlando](#).

As we stressed in our opening essay, true conservation will require quenching economic growth, a goal that can be advanced through blending convivial conservation and degrowth political-economic paradigms. This is not easy in practice, but with colleagues and community partners in South Africa, we are currently experimenting with this in our “Living Landscapes in Action” project.⁴ One of our cases in Cape Town resonates with [Orion Kriegman](#)’s important point that cities and urban ecologies are also vital spaces for convivial human-nonhuman relations.

To be sure, convivial conservation cannot be all things to all actors: it is unabashedly political and politicizing, targeting dominant actors to make space for voices, practices, and forms of wisdom too often excluded from mainstream decision-making processes. At the same time, it seeks to find commonality across difference to present a *structural* alternative to capitalist conservation and other dominant paradigms. We take to heart the important elements brought by this discussion and hope to continue the conversation going forward.

Endnotes

1. Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2020); Robert Fletcher, Kate Massarella, Ashish Kothari, Pallav Das, Anwesha Dutta, and Bram Büscher, “A New Future for Conservation: Setting out the Principles of Post-Growth Conservation,” *Progressive International*, August 10, 2020, <https://progressive.international/blueprint/e6e09a90-dc09-410d-af87-5d3339ad4ed3-fletcher-et-al-a-new-future-for-conservation/en>.
2. Bram Büscher and Maano Ramutsindela, “Green Violence: Rhino Poaching and the War to Save Southern Africa’s Peace Parks,” *African Affairs* 115, no. 458 (2016): 1–22; Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, “Under Pressure: Conceptualising Political Ecologies of Green Wars,” *Conservation and Society* 16, no. 2 (2018): 105–113; Rosaleen Duffy et al., “Why We Must Question the Militarisation of Conservation,” *Biological Conservation* 232 (2019): 66–73.
3. Harvey Locke et al., “A Nature-Positive World: The Global Goal for Nature, 2020, https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/NaturePositive_GlobalGoalCEO.pdf.
4. For more, see <https://www.plaas.org.za/living-landscapes-south-africa/>.